CHRISTOPHER KENWORTHY

SHOOT LIKE TARANTINO

The Visual Secrets of Dangerous Storytelling

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The Visual Secrets of Dangerous Directing

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MICHAEL WIESE PRODUCTIONS

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12400 Ventura Blvd. #1111
Studio City, CA 91604
(818) 379-8799, (818) 986-3408 (FAX)
mw@mwp.com
www.mwp.com

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INTRODUCTION

Quentin Tarantino is a master of tension, suspense, shock moments, dazzling dialogue scenes, and offbeat humor. This book shows you why the best moments in his films work so well, and how you can take that knowledge to make your own films work more effectively.

You don't want to copy Tarantino. Hundreds of people copy Tarantino without understanding what it is that makes him brilliant and the result is usually a lot of swearing and pointless violence. When people copy Tarantino badly it makes for an embarrassing mess.

You want to be an exciting and original filmmaker, but when you learn the shots, shortcuts, and creative setups that Tarantino has mastered, you will become a better filmmaker. An understanding of how he works should give you more opportunities to be creative with the camera.

A huge part of Tarantino's storytelling comes from his screenwriting and the way he directs actors, but he has such an advanced understanding of screen language that he's able to tell stories more efficiently than most directors. The films explored in this book show that no matter how good your actors or your script, you need to explore the magic of the camera to make your story work on the big screen.

The scenes chosen for this book range from unforgettable masterpieces to more functional moments, to show that a good storyteller must make the most of the shot, whether it's the best scene or one of the minor plot points. One of Tarantino's strengths is his efficiency. He proves that you barely need to move the camera to tell a good story. He also shows that every moment counts, and far from being a director who lets scenes drift on for no reason, he guarantees there is a point to everything you get to see.

The chapters in this book will teach you skills that you can apply to your own films, making them a part of your own style. When writing this book I made a point of studying how the scenes work, rather than reading any background information. I didn't want to know any theories or legends regarding scenes. For you to get the most from this book, you need to know the exact technical reasons that these scenes work. The important point here is that no matter how creative or wild you want to be, you need to be a technician to tell stories well.

Tarantino is famous for many reasons, but he is underrated as a technical filmmaker. This book illuminates his talent for establishing character and story in seconds, or maintaining tension for unbearable lengths of time. This would not be possible if he was simply covering the scenes in the traditional way, with a master and a few close-ups. His films work because he's found ways to shoot that make the most of every moment.

I hope this book will show you that good filmmakers do more than shoot the scene that's in front of them. There are details in these scenes that show Tarantino's obsession with getting the best possible scene. He cares about film, and he takes the time to make sure that every angle, every glance, every motion and camera move serves the needs of the story.

Tarantino shows that some of the simplest techniques can lead to some of the most sizzling scenes ever shot. When you know how Tarantino creates these tense, dramatic, and shocking scenes, you can adapt the ideas to your own style.

By the time you have reached the end of the book you should have a good grasp of how Tarantino sees a scene, how carefully he sets it up, and how he films creatively. You'll be able to shoot your own scenes with a better understanding of the visual techniques that make a scene come to life.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Watch every Tarantino film you can before you read this book and buy copies of the films that you can keep, so you can watch these scenes (and others) to decode the techniques. The chapters are filled with spoilers, so make sure you watch the films first. Most of the scenes are from relatively early on in the film, to avoid giving too much away, but you should still watch each film before reading the book.

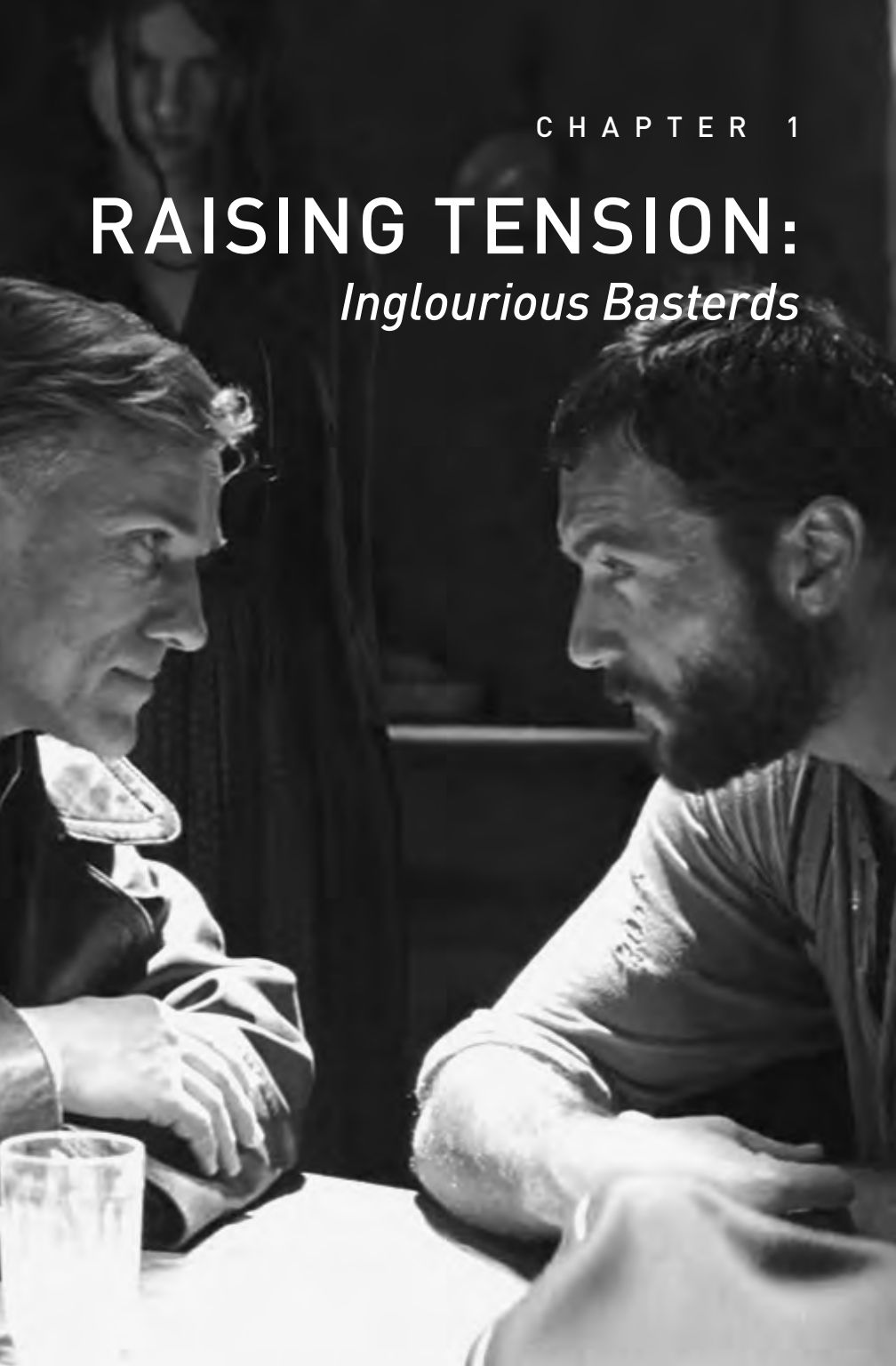
You can work through the book in order, pick a chapter that interests you, or work through according to your favorite films.

The techniques can be applied to your own work. If you're creating a scene that needs unbearable tension, there's a chapter dedicated to that and you can go straight there.

Before you read the chapter, watch the scene in question if you can and try to see how and why it works. Then, once you've read the chapter, watch the scene again, perhaps with the sound down so you can focus on the camera moves and see how the scene has been crafted.

CHAPTER 1

RAISING TENSION:
Inglourious Basterds



THE OPENING SEQUENCE OF this film is a masterpiece of rising tension, achieved through a simple combination of shots.

In most films, establishing shots are filmed at an angle, but this opening shot is shot flatly, directly from the side, to make it look almost like a storybook image.

This shows us the house, the man with the ax, and the laundry hanging up, the road to the side, as well as establishing that we are in the middle of the countryside. These images are all vital to the scene that follows.

Establishing shots should do more than show where the scene is about to take place. They set the mood, and show all the important details that will be needed later in the sequence.

The next shot of Denis Ménochet with the ax is shot from a low angle. This puts our focus on him, rather than the countryside and other surroundings (which are revealed later when the camera tilts down).

Importantly, the framing lets us see the log and the house, as in the establishing shot, making it clear that we're still in the same location.

Reveal your character by hiding some of the scene's details, but leave enough detail that we know where the character is situated.

We cut away from this shot to see a young women hanging up laundry, and when she hears a distant engine, she pulls the laundry aside to reveal the approaching Nazis. At this moment, the focus is pulled from the laundry to the distant Nazis in an instant.

When you move one object to reveal something else, it's a powerful reveal so long as the focus changes rapidly.

This is shocking because the domestic imagery is replaced with something frightening. The Nazis are distant and slow-moving, which shows that this is going to be a tense scene, rather than one filled with action.

A slowly approaching enemy tells the audience that the scene will be tense, and makes the enemy seem calm and powerful.

The next shot of Ménochet shows him reacting, and we see the ax hanging in the air, never completing its strike on the log. The ax shows up well against the sky because of the low angle.

To show a character's emotional reaction, make the character do something physical and visual.

Ménochet sits on the log and stares ahead. The house remains just in sight on the right of the frame, so we know exactly where

Ménochet is sitting, and that he's looking in the direction of the Nazis. He is apparently calm. This contrasts with the young woman in the background who runs frantically to get water.

When you show two things at once, make the foreground contrast with the background, to show what's really going on within the character.

We now see the first real close-up of Ménochet. At first he looks simply worried, but then presses the handkerchief to his face. The handkerchief is clearly significant to him. Moments like this may be scripted, but if not, try to find ways of showing your character doing something other than merely looking past the camera. A brief close-up can make us care for a character, if we sense that character misses somebody they love, or fears for loved ones.

Even in close-ups, show your character doing something other than merely observing.

The reverse angle is an over-the-shoulder shot, which connects everything together. We see Ménochet, the domestic location, and the approaching Nazis, who still seem to be moving extremely slowly.

Use a shot that shows your character and the approaching problem in the same frame, to connect them and raise tension.

The camera now tilts down, as Ménochet walks toward the house. The tilt reveals the house, the grass, and the distant hills. When setting up this shot, Tarantino framed precisely so that in one setup we could see Ménochet chopping, see the ax freeze in the air, and then with a tilt we see him head toward the house where the conflict will take place. Careful planning gave him several powerful images, with nothing more complicated than a camera sitting on a low tripod, tilting once.

Rather than shooting lots of coverage, design shots that reveal more as the scene goes on, with simple pans and tilts.

Ménochet approaches a washbasin at the edge of the house, and then we cut to a close-up of him washing. This would have to be cheated, with Ménochet several feet away from the wall of the house to make room for the camera equipment. The important point is that while he is trying to clean himself, he remains a mess, in stark contrast to the pristine Nazi who appears in the next shot.

When your character is trying to remain cool, use visual cues and symbolism to show that calm is impossible.

The enemy has been coming for some time, but the wide shot is the first time we see Christoph Waltz. Notably, he is tiny in the frame, and walks with a smile and a spring in his step. This makes him appear far more frightening than if he loomed toward us in a menacing close-up. This shot is also functional in that it establishes that Waltz is accompanied by several armed guards.

You can make the enemy seem slow, small, even friendly, and you will build tension.

The characters finally meet, but first we get to see Waltz invading the domestic space. The camera is placed so that we see Waltz through the laundry, which makes it feel like he is striding purposefully into a private space. We glimpse the ax — a potential weapon — unused in the background, which implies there will be no immediate fight.

Tracking with a character gives us a chance to see the environment they are entering, but make sure you frame so that there are objects in front of and behind the actor.

At first the camera appears to be tracking directly alongside Waltz, but after a few moments you can tell that the track has been placed at an angle away from him. This means that as he approaches Ménochet, the camera moves farther away from the two of them. In one setup, Tarantino is able to shoot a medium close-up of the villain at the beginning of the shot, and ends the shot with a medium wide, showing both men. This is important, because we see the friendly body language of the enemy, and the fearful body language of the victim.

By angling your dolly track away from an actor's path, you can change the framing without ever cutting.

There is a brief close-up of their hands shaking, and then we cut to a shot of the two men almost silhouetted against the countryside, still shaking hands. The framing here is as simple and direct as possible, so that we are looking at nothing other than the two men and the way they relate to each other. Ménochet's reluctance to shake hands is obvious, and we see Waltz's disturbing grin for the first time.

When two characters meet for the first time, try to show them both in the same frame. Make it wide enough to see their body language, but close enough to make out their expressions.

We see Waltz entering the house, but this shot also establishes that he's looking at the three daughters. Out the window we glimpse the troops, reminding us that there is danger outside.

Take the time to find framings that show who is in the scene, how they relate to each other, and what else is going on around them. This saves you shooting endless setups to cover everything.

The reverse shot shows the three daughters, framed centrally to emphasize their sense of being observed. Importantly, we glimpse a table to the right of screen, which sets up the geography of the scene.

When the main scene is about to take place in another part of the room, make sure we glimpse that part of the room in the opening shots.

We cut back to the first shot and the camera dollies a few feet to the left, as Waltz approaches the daughter on the left of frame. This reveals the window and the danger outside more clearly, and it shows that Ménochet is now cut off from his daughters. This subtle symbolism cranks up the tension.

We cut back to the reverse and see Waltz approaching the table ready to be seated. There is no need to shoot lots of coverage and angles. Simple imagery conveys exactly what is going on.

Let your actors move through the scene, and keep camera moves to a minimum to allow tension to escalate.

The tension continues to rise during a series of shots in which we see Waltz requesting a glass of milk, perhaps as a delaying tactic to watch the response of those around him. Most of the framings are simple and the only close-up we see during this scene is on Léa Seydoux, who is framed centrally, her eyes looking to the left of frame. This indicates that she is looking across at Ménochet, revealing her fear. If Waltz is trying to frighten them, this shows that it's working.

Use close-ups sparingly, only when you need to show a character's internal feelings. Central framing makes the shot more powerful.

We cut back to a wide of Ménochet, whose eyes are looking to the right of frame, showing he's made nervous eye contact with Seydoux. He then looks to the left of frame at Waltz. The camera is low now, at the same height as the seated Waltz, suggesting that the Nazi is in charge of the scene.

During moments of tension, put the camera at the head-height of the character who's controlling the situation to emphasize authority.

In a wider shot, Waltz leans in, urging Ménochet to lean in toward him. We can still see the daughters in the background and at the edge of frame. This proximity of characters makes it clear that the battle is going to be between these two. The daughters are sent outside.

Medium shots are an excellent way to connect two characters, while still showing the surrounding characters.

The main dialogue in the scene takes place in a seemingly conventional way, with two over-the-shoulder shots, and two medium shots. The composition of the first shot of Ménochet is interesting, because he is framed more centrally than in most films. This whole sequence has used central framing to imply a sense of being interrogated or observed, and that is preserved here.

When you've set a visual style for the scene, preserve that style even when you're focusing on the dialogue.

The over-the-shoulder shot of Waltz is an unusual choice because it is not a direct reverse. Normally, with the reverse angle you set the camera at the same distance, so that both actors appear the same size in the frame. Here, the camera is farther back, making Waltz seem small. By this point it's clear that his power is in his calculated calm, not his size, so letting him appear small makes him more frightening.

Even when you're shooting a straightforward conversation, consider how small changes can enhance the mood and tension of your scene.

The two close shots are fascinating because they have almost identical framing. Both actors are placed slightly to the right of frame. Normally, Ménochet would be on the right, and then when cutting to Waltz, he'd be on the left of frame. Instead, Tarantino has set it up so they both occupy the same space on the screen. The psychological effect of this is to make it seem as though Waltz has completely invaded Ménochet's space.

Symbolism helps to enhance the mood of a scene, even though the audience will not be aware of it consciously. Use framing to show one character taking another's place.

The next setup looks like a standard medium shot of the two characters talking to each other across a table. After a few moments, the camera moves to the left and circles around the back of Waltz until it ends up on the exact opposite side of the table. The characters have switched position in the frame.

This move creates the sensation that something else is going on, and that despite their stillness, tension is rising. No matter how mundane their conversation appears to be, the camera move shows that something is happening.

Before the tension reaches its climax, let the scene become still, but move the camera around the actors to show that the danger is increasing.

We jump cut to a close-up of Ménochet, from the same angle. There are several jump cuts in this opening sequence, and all work flawlessly, which means Tarantino must have insisted on exacting performances, with the actors re-creating physical movements perfectly. This usually means the jump cuts were planned.

If you want to jump cut, plan ahead and let your actors know they need to replicate their performance exactly.

The shot begins looking at Ménochet's back and, because we can't see what he's looking at, we expect another cut, or a move that will reveal something. To our surprise, the camera drops down toward the floor, toward his feet, below the floorboards, and to the climax of the scene. The camera doesn't show us what he's looking at, but far more importantly, it shows us what he's thinking about.

When you show an actor from behind it feels like something is being hidden. Whether you move down, up, or somewhere else, use this moment to show what the character is picturing and the buildup of tension is complete.